Gays: Springs shedding intolerance

City seen as more accepting, survey says

By **Susan Warmbrunn**
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Rost: Came to the Springs to help change its views.

■ Gay and Lesbian Fund helps groups/**A3**

When Nori Rost moved to the Springs in 1994, friends asked her why she would want to move to a place viewed by many nationwide as a homophobic, angry and mean city.

"Go where you're least wanted; that's where you're most needed," said Rost, an evangelical Christian, a mother and a lesbian.

Five years later, the Springs is a different city than the image — and stigma -- attached to it in 1992 as the birthplace of Amendment 2, which prohibited laws in Colorado protecting homosexuals from discrimination because of their sexual orientation, experts say.

A new study of attitudes portrays the Springs as a more tolerant and accepting city.

The study was based largely on a survey of about 200 participants in the 1998 Gay Pride Day celebration in the Springs. More than half — 53 percent — felt the Springs has become more accepting of gays and lesbians over the past few years.

It was conducted by the University of Colorado at Denver Graduate School of Public Affairs and paid for by the Gill Foundation's Gay and Lesbian Fund for Colorado.

Still, things are far from perfect for gays and lesbians in the Springs. About 45 percent of survey respondents said they were treated "unfairly," and almost 40 percent said they had suffered discrimination in the past year.

"When Amendment 2 was happening, (the Springs) felt extremely hostile, so I think we can celebrate that the environment has gotten better," said Katherine Pease, executive director of the Gill Foundation.

Pease attributes the changes to a

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Gays/Many still fear discrimination

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number of factors — an influx of well-educated and more open-minded residents, a backlash by voters against the politics of intolerance and civic leaders urging an end to hate.

Also reporting a "major shift" in attitudes around the Springs is Frank Whitworth, a community activist who founded Ground Zero, a gay and lesbian educational advocacy organization.

"The city . . . was sold a bill of goods by the far right that the gays and lesbians were somehow a threat to them in 1992," Whitworth said. Since then, many have "come to realize that we're simply part of the community like everyone else."

Gays and lesbians are being seen more as complex individuals and not simply defined by their sexuality, he said.

"Suppose you believe what gays and lesbians do sexually is wrong — that's your belief," Whitworth said. "But what (people) are finding is that gays and lesbians are more than what they do sexually, just as heterosexuals are more than what they do sexually."

Still, the Springs has a long way to go to reach a point where gays and lesbians don't have to live with the fear of being discriminated against because of their sexual orientation.

About a dozen states have civil rights laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

In April, a similar bill was defeated by four votes in the Colorado House.

Without such laws, discrimination remains legal, Whitworth said.

As a result, many gays and lesbians fear they will lose their jobs or their housing if people find out they are homosexual.

Walking down the street, gays and lesbians still have to bear someone screaming "faggot" or "dyke" at them from the window of a moving vehicle.

Around the time of Amendment 2, someone vandalized Pease's car. That kind of act doesn't fit in with today's climate, Pease said, but "we should pay strong attention that 40 percent have experienced some form of discrimination."

And attacking the fear it creates is paramount, said Holly Floyd, the executive director of Inside/Out Youth Services.

"A lot of youth aren't able to speak to their parents because of the fear," said Floyd. "What we're trying to change is the fear."

Still, Whitworth says Colorado Springs is where he wants to live. That's why he plans to keep working to improve the whole community.

"There are two levels you work on: you work on the level of changing law and you work on the level of changing people," Whitworth said. "You can pass all the laws you want, but you still have to change the people."

And it's the people who can change the city, says Rost.

Sure, some will continue to make degrading jokes at work. Some will call the Urban League "the tool of the devil" for accepting money from the Gay and Lesbian Fund. But maybe not as many people will laugh or nod in agreement as before, Rost said.

"I really believe this city can rise from the ashes of intolerance and be renowned for that," Rost said. "That's part of the reason I'm here — to be in a place where bridges are built, not just walls."

Susan Warmbrunn covers community issues and may be reached at 636-0247 or susanw@gazette.com

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